

Activating the Loneliest Lighthouse in the World



This small team of hams chartered a boat via Lake Superior for a first-time activation of Stannard Rock Light for National Lighthouse Day.

Daniel Martin-Mills, N8PPQ

In 2021, I was looking for a fun way to get back into ham radio after about a 10-year hiatus. During my search, I came across Stannard Rock Light (also known as the loneliest lighthouse in the world), located in the frigid waters of Lake Superior in Michigan. I decided to attempt a first-time activation of this location for National Lighthouse Day during the US National Lighthouse-Lightship Weekend (<https://arlhs.com/events/national-lighthouse-lightship-week-nllw>).

Stannard Rock Light earned its name as the loneliest lighthouse in the world not only because it's located 39 kilometers from land, branding it the most distant lighthouse in the US, but also because it was a "stag station." Before traditional lighthouse keepers became obsolete, they were able to have their families in or near the lighthouse that they manned. However, stag-station lighthouses were operated solely by the keepers, without accommodating their families.

The lighthouse sits atop a hazardous reef in Lake Superior, and you must be 20 miles from land in order to see its light. Seaworthy boats with dual engines and experienced captains regularly attempt to visit the shoal, but they often have to cancel their trips due to the risks caused by severe weather. In addition to habitually enduring extreme weather conditions, Stannard Rock

Light also suffered damages from a gasoline explosion below its main deck in 1961.

Planning the Activation

The first step in planning my activation of Stannard Rock Light was contacting Carl Lindquist, Executive Director and Founder of the Superior Watershed Partnership (SWP). I approached him with a proposal to use amateur radio to draw attention to the lighthouse's restoration project, as well as to the SWP's mission of improving the ecosystem of Michigan's Great Lakes. His tentative approval prompted my next steps of assembling a team and finding a way to get access to and from the lighthouse.

After the first three charter companies I contacted refused my request, I finally spoke with Dave Kimar, owner of Kimar's Charters, who proudly said he has delivered equipment and researchers to the lighthouse over the course of many years. He agreed to help, but only if he thought our amateur radio team was prepared for the trip.

Assembling a Team

Team members included my longtime friend Matt Crehan; Jared Bergeron, N8CZ; Greg Stoike, KN4CK, and Nick Baine, AC8CQ. Greg is President of the Grand Rapids Amateur Radio Association, and Jared is the

association's On Air Director, as well as the Staff Advisor to the Grand Valley State University (GVSU) Amateur Radio Council, W8GVU, which I founded in 1995. Nick is W8GVU's Faculty Advisor and License Trustee. Jared and GVSU student Justin Wolters, N8FCC, were reviving the club after it experienced several years of hiatus, and had contacted me around the time I was planning my activation of Stannard Rock Light.

Using Discord, a free chat app, we began coordinating our trip. We met at a riverside park and tested radio operations in close quarters, as well as hoisted heavy loads with block and tackle and a boom lift that Jared and Nick built at GVSU. After submitting detailed updates to Carl, along with proof of equipment insurance through ARRL (www.arrlinsurance.com) and agreeing to comply with regulations by bringing a camp toilet, we got approval to operate and stay overnight at Stannard Rock Light.

Traveling to the Lighthouse

At daybreak on National Lighthouse Day (August 7, 2021), we met with Dave to discuss whether or not he felt we were prepared for him to charter us to the lighthouse. His two largest boats developed mechanical problems days before, so we would have to use a smaller boat — a 26-foot welded aluminum offshore fishing boat.

Scientific instruments on and around the lighthouse reported that the weather there (49 miles from the dock where we were) had been rough all night but was calming down. Waves were currently reaching 5 feet tall,



Matt Crehan and Jared Bergeron, N8CZ, hoisted the generator from the boat onto the lighthouse deck using the boom lift built by Jared and Nick Baine, AC8CQ.

and storms were predicted for the evening. We all confirmed with Dave that we were able (and willing) to stay a few extra nights at the lighthouse if the weather became too risky for us to return when scheduled. It was clear the concerning factor was not the boat, but our own capabilities. Fortunately, the wind and waves calmed down over our 2-hour voyage to the lighthouse.

Dave skillfully brought the bow of the boat close enough to Stannard Rock for me to grab the 22-foot ladder that provides access to the lighthouse deck. I tied the bow of the boat to the deck, then went up and down another ladder to tie the stern. Once I was back on the light-

From inside a tent on the Stannard Rock Light deck, I operated with a Buddipole, G5RV antenna, and my old IC-735 transceiver.



house deck I dropped a line of rope for hoisting gear, while Matt, Jared, and Greg climbed up the ladder to join me. Jared attached the boom lift and assembled the pulleys, while Nick gathered the generator, which was our heaviest item. Their engineering of the boom lift had paid off — the generator easily cleared the 2-foot overhang, and we were able to transport the rest of our equipment shortly after.

Amateur Radio Operations

The first person to get on the air from Stannard Rock Light for US National Lighthouse-Lightship Weekend was Greg, using his 6-meter station — an Elecraft KX3 transceiver and a three-element Yagi antenna. He also got our marine band antenna working (marine band VHF operations don't require a ham radio license).

Jared set up his Yaesu FT-991A transceiver and an inverted V, end-fed half-wave (EFHW) antenna on the seventh floor of the lighthouse. He also connected the radio to the J-pole antenna that Greg made for marine band VHF operation.

The team also operated FT8 with my Icom IC-7300 transceiver and G5RV multiband HF antenna from the third floor of the lighthouse.

I operated CW during the North American QSO Party from a tent on the lighthouse deck with a Buddipole™ antenna and my 30-year-old IC-735 transceiver. Later, I used the G5RV for phone operations on 40 and 20 meters. There was heavy static, but the wind was louder. The wind was so strong that it caused the G5RV support to bend, and it even lifted the tent off the deck at one point.

Bellowing winds grew stronger overnight with light rain. By 0700 UTC, we seemed certain we would have to stay longer than scheduled. Thankfully, winds calmed down by mid-morning. Dave traveled back to get us,



Greg Stoike, KN4CK, operated on 6 meters from the fifth floor of the lighthouse, using an Elecraft KX3 transceiver and a three-element Yagi antenna.



Nick Baine, AC8CQ, and Jared Bergeron, N8CZ, operated from the third floor of the lighthouse with my Icom IC-7300 transceiver and G5RV antenna.

and we loaded our gear into his boat surrounded by 5-foot waves. The trip back took almost 4 hours, which was double the time it took to get there the day before.

Our Results

We made our first contact at 2307 UTC on August 7, and the last contact was made at 1607 UTC on August 8. We operated for a total of 17 hours, contacting 40 states and eight countries (about 20.5 contacts per hour). Our operations on Stannard Rock Light earned us three QRZ awards: the Grid Squared Award, United States Counties Award, and World Radio Friendship Award. More details about our operations can be found on Logbook of The World (LoTW) and at <http://n8ppq.net/stannardrock/log.aspx>.

We succeeded in becoming the only amateur radio team to activate Stannard Rock Light (USA-808). But perhaps the best part of it all is that the loneliest lighthouse in the world had the company of our team (and well-wishers from all over the world) for one weekend, thanks to amateur radio.

All photos by the author.

Daniel Martin-Mills, N8PPQ, is employed as a C# Software Developer. He has been an amateur radio operator for 30 years and has been active in several clubs. Daniel enjoys HF contesting, DX pileups, and operating special event stations. He recently completed a new one: W8H — "Horses On The Air!" Daniel's article, "National Science Olympiad Special Event," was published in the December 1998 issue of *QST*. Several years ago, he engaged a Venturing group for Boy Scouts of America to activate the South Manitou Island Lighthouse. Daniel can be reached at email@n8ppq.net.

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